STAR

Street Transvestite
Action Revolutionaries

IN A WORLD OF DARKNESS

Do you know what it is to live in a World of Darkness?

Where people put you down for being what you are.

Day or night it is always darkness for us of the Life.

Do you know what it is to live in a world of darkness?

I wish you knew.

IWhen we walk down the street

In this world of darkness where people

always talk about us and call us names.

People are supposed to be free,

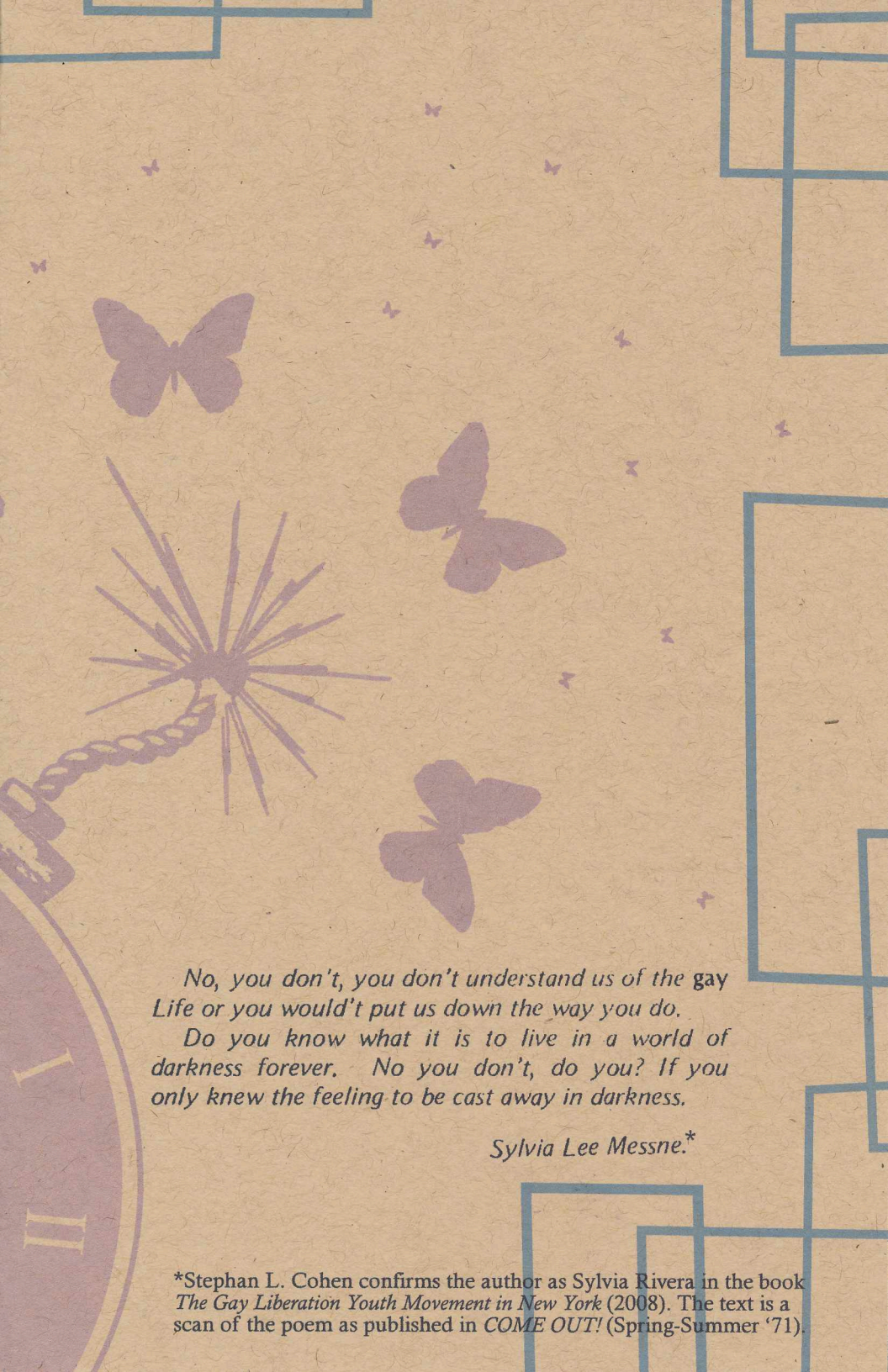
Where??? To be what God has sent her or him to be?

This is not freedom, I ask you. Is it?

Do you know what it is to live in a world of darkness? I ask you.

No, you don't, do you? Well it's miserable.

It's nothing but coldness from the day we are born to the day we die.



No, you don't, you don't understand us of the gay *Life or you would't put us down the way you do.*

Do you know what it is to live in a world of darkness forever. No you don't, do you? If you only knew the feeling to be cast away in darkness.

*Sylvia Lee Messne.**

*Stephan L. Cohen confirms the author as Sylvia Rivera in the book *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York* (2008). The text is a scan of the poem as published in *COME OUT!* (Spring-Summer '71).

INTRODUCTION, 2023
MUTUAL AID REPRINT

This is a reprint of a zine about STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) that was published by Untorelli Press in 2013—with a few changes.

For one, this version opens with an acknowledgment of the labor that Tourmaline, then writing under the name Reina Gossett, contributed to our understanding of STAR and the lives of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. There's an entire generation of trans women who found a missing part of our past, part of ourselves even, in the work that Tourmaline shared on tumblr—findings from the research she did in the New York Public Library archives have been available for over ten years on her blog at thespiritwas.tumblr.com.

At the same time, this zine seeks to reclaim the words of STAR and its members and pry them out of the hands of respectable queer and trans people who have embedded themselves inside the very institutions that carry out violence against the rest of us. Tourmaline herself has turned away from STAR by partnering with wealthy non-profits, universities, museums, and media companies. But the memory of STAR belongs to poor, sex-working, forgotten trans people who cannot live in the world where Tourmaline has found success.

This zine was created by a trans woman of color sex worker to raise survival funds for another. Because even though I'm able to make rent this month, I know that next month I might be the one who needs help from my community—help that no art curator, magazine editor, or trans celebrity would give us.

As Arthur Bell wrote of STAR, they were "mainly into whoring and radical politics. Their philosophy is to destroy the system that's fucking us over." A crude description, but that's us too.

Other changes to this zine: the Untorelli introduction has

been removed (throwing out its white guilt, its admitted hesitation) to create space and allow for more relevant texts to be added: (1) the STAR manifesto (described by Stephan L. Cohen in *Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York* as the group's formal "platform"); (2) a poem by Sylvia titled "In a World of Darkness", published in the NY Gay Liberation Front newspaper *COME OUT!* (Spring/Summer 1971); (3) an interview published in *Gay Flames* (Nov 1970) where Sylvia Rivera and Arthur Bell spoke to Chris Thompson, "a black male transvestite" being held in conditions of imprisonment in a psych ward; (4) An interview of former STAR and GAA member Bebe Scarpi from around 2010.

Regrettably, there still wasn't space to add the "Transvestite and Transsexual Liberation" manifesto co-signed by STAR and other trans liberation groups, which was published in the *Detroit Gay Liberator* (Jan 1971). You can download issues of *COME OUT!*, *Gay Flames*, *Detroit Gay Liberator,* and other newspapers from the gay liberation movement from JSTOR for free (no account needed).

Finally, this zine includes new cover art that borrows from the work of Juan Carlos Vidal and Néstor Latrónico, who were members of NY GLF and Third World Gay Revolution.

M. Garcia, Editor

'I'M GLAD I WAS IN THE STONEWALL RIOT'

Sylvia Rivera interviewed
by Leslie Feinberg
Trans Liberation:
Beyond Pink or Blue (1998)

I left home at age 10 in 1961. I hustled on 42nd Street. The early 60s was not a good time for drag queens, effeminate boys or boys that wore makeup like we did. Back then we were beat up by the police, by everybody. I didn't really come out as a drag queen until the late 60s. when drag queens were arrested, what degradation there was. I remember the first time I got arrested, I wasn't even in full drag. I was walking down the street and the cops just snatched me.

We always felt that the police were the real enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals-and we were. We were stuck in a bullpen like a bunch of freaks. We were disrespected. A lot of us were beaten up and raped. When I ended up going to jail, to do 90 days, they tried to rape me. I very nicely bit the shit out of a man.

I've been through it all.

In 1969, the night of the Stonewall riot, was a very hot, muggy night. We were in the Stonewall [bar] and the lights came on. We all stopped dancing. The police came in. They had gotten their payoff earlier in the week. But Inspector Pine came in-him and his morals squad-to spend more of the government's money.

We were led out of the bar and they cattled us all up against the police vans. The cops pushed us up against the grates and the fences. People started throwing pennies, nickels, and quarters at the cops.

And then the bottles started. And then we finally had the morals squad barricaded in the Stonewall building, because they

were actually afraid of us at that time. They didn't know we were going to react that way.

We were not taking any more of this shit. We had done so much for other movements. It was time.

It was street gay people from the Village out front: homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar- and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us. The Stonewall Inn telephone lines were cut and they were left in the dark.

One *Village Voice* reporter was in the bar at that time. And according to the archives of the Village Voice, he was handed a gun from Inspector Pine and told, "We got to fight our way out of there."

This was after one Molotov cocktail was thrown and we were ramming the door of the Stonewall bar with an uprooted parking meter. So they were ready to come out shooting that night.

Finally the Tactical Police Force showed up after 45 minutes. A lot of people forget that for 45 minutes we had them trapped in there.

All of us were working for so many movements at that time. Everyone was involved with the women's movement, the peace movement, the civil-rights ovement. We were all radicals. I believe that's what brought it around.

You get tired of being just pushed around.

STAR came about after a sit-in at Weinstein Hall at New York University in 1970. Later we had a chapter in New York, one in Chicago, one in California and England.

STAR was for the street gay people, the street homeless people and anybody that needed help at that time. Marsha and I had always sneaked people into our hotel rooms. Marsha and I decided to get a building. We were trying to get away from the Mafia's control at the bars.

We got a building at 213 East 2nd Street. Marsha and I just decided it was time to help each other and help our other kids. We

fed people and clothed people. We kept the building going. We went out and hustled the streets. We paid the rent. We didn't want the kids out in the streets hustling. They would go out and rip off food. There was always food in the house and everyone had fun. It lasted for two or three years. We would sit there and ask, "Why do we suffer?" As we got more involved into the movements, we said, "Why do we always got to take the brunt of this shit?"

Later on, when the Young Lords [revolutionary Puerto Rican youth group] came about in New York City, I was already in GLF [Gay Liberation Front]. There was a mass demonstration that started in East Harlem in the fall of 1970. The protest was against police repression and we decided to join the demonstration with our STAR banner. That was one of first times the STAR banner was shown in public, where STAR was present as a group. I ended up meeting some of the Young Lords that day. I became one of them. Any time they needed any help, I was always there for the Young Lords. It was just the respect they gave us as human beings. They gave us a lot of respect. It was a fabulous feeling for me to be myself-being part of the Young Lords as a drag queen-and my organization [STAR] being part of the Young Lords.

I met [Black Panther Party leader] Huey Newton at the Peoples' Revolutionary Convention in Philadelphia in 1971. Huey decided we were part of the revolution - that we were revolutionary people.

I was a radical, a revolutionist. I am still a revolutionist. I was proud to make the road and help change laws and what-not. I was very proud of doing that and proud of what I'm still doing, no matter what it takes.

Today, we have to fight back against the government. We have to fight them back. They're cutting back Medicaid, cutting back on medicine for people with AIDS. They want to take away from women on welfare and put them into that little work

program. They're going to cut SSI. Now they're taking away food stamps. These people who want the cuts-these people are making millions and millions and millions of dollars as CEOs. Why is the government going to take it away from us? What they're doing is cutting us back. Why can't we have a break?

I'm glad I was in the Stonewall riot. I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought: "My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!"

I always believed that we would have a fight back. I just knew that we would fight back. I just didn't know it would be that night.

I am proud of myself as being there that night. If I had lost that moment, I would have been kind of hurt because that's when I saw the world change for me and my people.

Of course, we still got a long way ahead of us.

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[Editor's note: See also historian David Carter's work—*Stonewall* (2004) and "Exploding the Myths of Stonewall" in *Gay City News* (2019)—for evidence that Sylvia wasn't actually there on the first night of the uprising.

Beyond Sylvia's presence or absence at Stonewall, however, there's the contested meaning of the uprising itself. STAR is just one of many groups that have defined themselves in relation to their imagining of Stonewall. As marginalized people who were considered "an embarrassment and criminals" (Bebe Scarpi) even by other gay activists STAR claimed legitimacy and moral power by framing the event as a rebellion spearheaded by themselves: the masses of unorganized queer and trans street youth. But there is no party that isn't engaged in myth-making.

In *Stonewall*, Carter takes it upon himself to assess which group was "most responsible for the success of the riots" and seems to delight in calculating exactly who "gets credit" for it before making his pronouncement: "...most were Caucasian; few were Latino; almost none were transvestites or transsexuals; most were effeminate; and a fair number came from middle-class families." Thus, he casts himself as the rightful heir of Stonewall, discounting the contributions of trans people that he doesn't even bother to gender correctly–in the same way mainstream gay orgs like the Human Rights Campaign celebrate Stonewall every year while continuing to abandon trans women who are as vulnerable today as Marsha and Sylvia were fifty years ago.]

EVERY DESTRUCTIVE THING

A 'dialogue' between
Sylvia Rivera and some pigs
Radio Documentary by Dave Isay
All Things Considered / NPR (1989)

SYLVIA RIVERA: My name is Sylvia Rivera. My name before that was Ray Rivera, until I started dressing in drag in 1961. The era before Stonewall was a hard era. There was always the gay bashings on the drag queens by heterosexual men, women, and the police. We learned to live with it because it was part of the lifestyle at that time, I guess, but none of us were very happy about it.

SOME PIG: My name is Seymour Pine. In 1968, I was assigned as Deputy Inspector in charge of public morals in the first division in the police department, which covered the Greenwich Village area. It was the duty of Public Morals to enforce all laws concerning vice and gambling, including prostitution, narcotics, and laws and regulations concerning homosexuality. The part of the penal code which applied to drag queens was Section 240.35, section 4: "Being masked or in any manner disguised by unusual or unnatural attire or facial alteration; loiters, remains, or congregates in a public place with other persons so masked..."

(Pine continues reading under Rivera's voice and then fades out.)

RIVERA: At that time we lived at the Arista Hotel. We used to sit around, just try to figure out when this harassment would come to an end. And we would always dream that one day it would come to an end. And we prayed and we looked for it. We wanted to be human beings.

PIG: You felt, well, two guys — and that's very often all we sent in would be two men — could handle two hundred people. I mean, you tell them to leave and they leave, and you say show me your identification and they all take out their identification and file out and that's it. And you say, okay, you're not a man, you're a woman, or you're vice versa and you wait over there. I mean, this was a kind of power that you have and you never gave it a second thought.

RIVERA: The drag queens took a lot of oppression and we had to ... we were at a point where I guess nothing would have stopped us. I guess, as they say, or as Shakespeare says, we were ladies in waiting, just waiting for the thing to happen. And when it did happen, we were there.

PIG: There was never any reason to feel that anything of any unusual situation would occur that night.

RIVERA: You could actually feel it in the air. You really could. I guess Judy Garland's death just really helped us really hit the fan.
PIG: For some reason, things were different this night. As we were bringing the prisoners out, they were resisting.

(Riot sounds in the background.)

RIVERA: People started gathering in front of the Sheridan Square Park right across the street from Stonewall. People were upset — "No, we're not going to go!" and people started screaming and hollering.

PIG: One drag queen, as we put her in the car, opened the door on the other side and jumped out. At which time we had to chase that person and he was caught, put back into the car, he made another attempt to get out the same door, the other door, and at

that point we had to handcuff the person. From this point on, things really began to get crazy.

PIG: Well that's when all hell broke loose at that point. And then we had to get back into Stonewall.

MEDIA PIG: My name is Howard Smith. On the night of the Stonewall riots I was a reporter for the *Village Voice*, locked inside with the police, covering it for my column. It really did appear that that crowd – because we could look through little peepholes in the plywood windows, we could look out and we could see that the crowd – well, my guess was within five, ten minutes it was probably several thousand people. Two thousand easy. And they were yelling "Kill the cops! Police brutality! Let's get 'em! We're not going to take this anymore! Let's get 'em!"

PIG: We noticed a group of persons attempting to uproot one of the parking meters, at which they did succeed. And they then used that parking meter as a battering ram to break down the door. And they did in fact open the door — they crashed it in — and at that point was when they began throwing Molotov cocktails into the place. It was a situation that we didn't know how we were going to be able control.

RIVERA: I remember someone throwing a Molotov cocktail. I don't know who the person was, but I mean I saw that and I just said to myself in Spanish, I said. oh my God, the revolution is finally here! And I just like started screaming "Freedom! We're free at last!" You know. It felt really good.

PIG: Remember these were pros, but everybody was frightened. There's no question about that. I know I was frightened, and I'd been in combat situations, and there was never any time that I felt more scared than I felt that night. And, I mean, you know there

was no place to run.

RIVERA: Once the tactical police force showed up, I think that really incited us a little bit more. Here this queen is going completely bananas, you know jumping on, hitting the windshield. The next thing you know, the taxicab was being turned over. The cars were being turned over, windows were shattering all over the place, fires were burning around the place. It was beautiful, it really was. It was really beautiful.

RIVERA: I wanted to do every destructive thing that I could think of at that time to hurt anyone that had hurt us through the years.

RIVERA: A lot of heads were bashed. But it didn't hurt their true feelings — they all came back for more and more. Nothing — that's when you could tell that nothing could stop us at that time or any time in the future.

Today I'm a 38-year-old drag queen. I can keep my long hair, I can pluck my eyebrows, and I can work wherever the hell I want. And I'm not going to change for anybody. If I changed, then I feel that I'm losing what 1969 brought into my life, and that was to be totally free.

GAY POWER—WHEN DO WE WANT IT? OR DO WE?

Statement on the Sept. 1970
NYU occupation
Scanned flyer via NYPL Digital Collections

This is the question that is running through our minds. Do you really want Gay Power or are you looking for a few laughs or maybe a little excitement. We are not quite sure what you people really want. IF you want Gay Liberation then you're going to have to fight for it. We don't mean tomorrow or the next day, we are talking about today. We can never possibly win by saying "wait for a better day" or "we're not ready yet" If you're ready to tell people that you want to be free, then your ready to fight. And if your not ready then shut up and crawl back into your closets. But let us ask you this, Can you really live in a closet? We cant.

So now the question is, do we want Gay Power or Pig Power. We are willing to admit that we need pigs. But we only need t hen for crime control. We do not need them to beat and harass our gay brothers and sisters. The pigs are not helping the people who are being robbed on the streets and being murdered. How can they when they're to busy trying to bust a homosexual over the head. Or they're to busy trying to catch someone hustling so they can arrest t hem. But they do give us an alternative. All we have to do is commit sodomy with them and they'll forget they were saw us. Until next time that is. So again we ask you, do you want pig power or gay power? This is up to each and every one of you.

If you want gay power then you're going to have to fight for it. And you're going to have to fight until you win. Because once you start you're not going to be able to stop because if you do you'll lose everything. You wont just lose this fight, but all the other fights all over the country. All our brothers and sisters all over the world will return to their closets in shame. So if you want

to fight for your rights, then fight till the end.

We would also like to say that all we fought for at Weinstein Hall was lost when we left upon request of the pigs. Chalk one up for the pigs, for they truly are carrying there victory flag. And realize the next demonstration is going to be harder, because they now know that we scare easily.

You people run if you want to, but we're tired of running. We intend to fight for our rights until we get them.

Street Transvestites For Gay Power

CHRIS: GAY PRISONER IN BELLEVUE

(GAY FLAMES: Chris Thompson is a black male transvestite who went to Bellevue Hospital for treatment of his asthma. Because he was gay and a transvestite, he was transferred to the psychiatric wing, where he could be "kept under control." Chris has found brutality and ridicule at Bellevue, not medical attention and is now threatened with transfer to a state mental hospital, from which he might never return. STAR's Sylvia Rivera and GAA's Arthur Bell conducted an interview, a part of which is printed here.) [Published Nov. 1970]

Q: Do you feel that you're being held prisoner here?

A: I feel that I am a prisoner and have been mistreated. They claim they are trying to help me but I don't think they are. I think they are just bull... just playing with me, just because of my homosexuality, wondering whether I want to have an operation, and asking me all these questions which doesn't concern them. They claim they're treating me because of my asthma. They said they thought I may have tuberculosis, so they did a biopsy and they found it was congestion of the chest. Then they told me they was going to send me home. I asked the doctor three weeks ago if I could have a pass that I could take care of finding housing , and she said "No." And I asked why and she said "Because we can't let you out by yourself." She said she was going to ask for an attendant, but then she said she couldn't find no attendant that could go with me.

Q: Do you think they're going to keep you in here perhaps forever?

A: Well, she told me if I can't find a place to stay they would have to transfer me straight to state hospital. But everyone tells me that here you can file for a lawyer; they can't send you to the

state hospital...they have to give me some welfare assistance.

Q: Would you want us to support you if they continue holding you here?

A: Yes, I would want full support.

Q: One of the things we'd like to know is how are the people around here – the doctors and the nurses and attendants?

A: Well, I only get funny cracks. They say you're still a man and they still are always low-rating me and saying funny little cracks and putting me down and making me feel bad all the time. I had a nurse get very nasty with me. She said, "we've had faggots here before" and she treats me very nasty and snotty and she says, "Don't mess with the hand that feeds you." She's told me that I would never look as good as she looks, "so don't get your high horses up." I felt that she felt some jealousy, something against homosexuality and she got very evil with me. When I came into admitting office, I told the doctor I had congestion and asthma. Because of me wanting to be a woman so much, he asked me did I ever have a fear of cutting my penis off. I didn't tell him one way or the other, but on my record they have it down that I have a fear of cutting my penis off, to become a woman. I want to become a woman that bad, so they asked me these questions – do I still have a fear of taking a razor and cutting my penis off and I told them no, and if I did decide to have a sex change I would go through the legal procedures and go to the proper physicians and have it done.

Q: Do you feel that you're being treated worse than the other patients?

A: Yes I feel that I'm treated much worse because of my femme tendencies and I'm always criticized about my hair or I'm always criticized about my face or something like that. My doctor told me as long as my make-up wasn't too noticeable that I could wear it but then the attendants said that the doctor said I couldn't

wear it... so it's just like they bull.. they're saying this and saying that.

Q: What do you do in your spare time?

A: I don't do anything. I have usually been sick so I just stay in the bed and they get very angry. I go to all the group therapy they have here, drama therapy, and all that.

Q: Are they trying to make you straight? Did they get into that?

A: They haven't been really trying to change me, but they make me feel bad by ridiculing me.

Q: Not the doctors, the other patients, right?

A: No, I have no problems with the patients. The patients accept me quite highly. It's the staff that really bugs me.

Q: Is there anything else that you can tell us about your stay here that might be interesting?

A: Well, as I told my doctor, I wasn't here to tempt any patients, I was only here to get medical help. She says that they can't transfer me. One reason is 'cause I'm homosexual, and another is that they don't transfer psychiatric patients. Also, they made me sleep in the hall because they were afraid that the males may get interested in me.

Q: Chris, just looking at you now, it doesn't look as if you're wearing any make-up at all, and you certainly can pass for straight. What I don't understand is why they're so down on you. The only thing I notice is that you have your hair a little longer than average.

A: It's just the fact that if I look any kind of way effeminate, they get up tight about it. I had some jeweled eyelashes which were given to me by a patient here, and they took them from me.

They took my hair rollers away, they locked up all my female attire, they said I can't have it until I leave the hospital. I wanted to set my hair for an Afro; they wouldn't let me set it because it attracts the male attention, the males would get uptight.

Q: They're afraid of having anybody go to bed with you while you're here.

A: I think they fear that I will have a homosexual affair here if I look too effeminate.

Q: And that's worse to them than the rats in the hallways?

A: Well, I think there's rats on the staff! And they say when I blow my top and tell them off that I am crazy, but I am only standing up for my rights...because I am human like anyone else.

Q: Do you have any plans for when you get out of here?

A: Yes, I would like to go back to school and finish college and become a dance therapist, an activity therapist. That's what I want to be.

Q: Were you a dancer before?

A: Yes, I was.

Q: Are you interested in the STAR (Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries) movement?

A: I'm interested in anything that has anything to do with the gay activities. I'm all for it all, and I want to fight for it. I'm willing to go all the way as far as I can go – if it means even my life I'll do it.

Q: What do you feel about the sort of thing that Sylvia is into now. (Sylvia is an officer of STAR. –ed)

A: I think its beautiful. I think that if we can help our people

– when I say our people I mean gay people – I think I'm all for it.

Q: Have you had any thoughts about how you can help gay people, what you might be able to do once you're out of here?

A: If I obtain a job and work, if it's for any gay person, I don't care who it is, I would give fully. I'm all for gay people that's my feelings, this coming straight from my heart. And I mean it.

TRANSVESTITES: YOUR HALF SISTERS AND HALF BROTHERS OF THE REVOLUTION

Sylvia Rivera
COME OUT! Winter 1972

Transvestites are homosexual men and women who dress in clothes of the opposite sex. Male transvestites dress and live as women. Half sisters like myself are women with the minds of women trapped in male bodies. Female
transvestites dress and live as men. My half brothers are men with male minds trapped in female bodies. Transvestites are the most oppressed people in the homosexual community. My half sisters and brothers are being raped and murdered by pigs, straights, and even sometimes by other uptight homosexuals who consider us the scum of the gay community. They do this because they are not liberated.

Transvestites are the most liberated homosexuals in the world. We have had the guts to stand up and fight on the front lines for many years before the gay movement was born.

As far back as I can remember, my half sisters and brothers liberated themselves from this fucked up system that has been oppressing our gay sisters and brothers - by walking on the man's land, defining the man's law, and meeting with the man face to face in his court of law. We have liberated his bathrooms and streets in our female or male attire. For exposing the man's law we are thrown into jail on charges of criminal impersonation; that dates back as far as the Boston Tea Party when the English dressed up as Indians because the motherland had raised the taxes. We have lost our jobs, our homes, friends, family because of lack of understanding of our inner-most feelings and lack of knowledge of our valid life style. They have been brainwashed by this fucked up system that has condemned us and by doctors that call us a

disease and a bunch of freaks. Our family and friends have also condemned us because of their lack of true knowledge.

By being liberated my half sisters and brothers and myself are able to educate the ignorant gays and straights that transvestism is a valid life style. Remember the Stonewall Riots? That first stone was cast by a transvestite half sister June 27, 1969 and the gay liberation movement was born. Remember that transvestites and gay street people are always on the front lines and are ready to lay their lives down for the movement. Remember the transvestite half sister that was out gathering signatures for the Homosexual Civil Rights Bill petition and was arrested on 42nd Street. Remember the NYU sit-in? Transvestites and gay street people held the fort down and didn't want to give in that Friday night after we had been removed from the sub-cellar.

So sisters and brothers remember that transvestites are not the scum of the community; just think back on the events of the past two years. You should be proud that we are part of the community and you should try to gain some knowledge of your transvestite half brothers and sisters and our valid life style. Remember we started the whole movement that 27th day of June of the year 1969!

Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries meet Friday at 6:00 p.m. At Marsha Johnson's, 211 Eldridge Street, New York, N.Y., apt. 3. For information write: S.T.A.R., c/o Marsha Johnson, at the same address.

Power to all the people!

RAPPING WITH A STREET TRANSVESTITE REVOLUTIONARY

An interview with Marsha P. Johnson
Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation (1972)

You were starting to tell me a few minutes ago that a group of STAR people got busted. What was that all about?

Well, we wrote an article for Arthur Bell, of the *Village Voice,* about STAR, and we told him that we were all "girlies" and we're working up on the 42nd Street area. And we all gave our names – Bambi, Andorra, Marsha, and Sylvia. And we all went out to hustle, you know, about a few days after the article came out in the *Village Voice,* and you see we get busted one after another, in a matter of a couple of weeks. I don't know whether it was the article, or whether we just got busted because it was hot.

Were they arresting a lot of transvestites up around there?

Oh, yes, and they still are. They're still taking a lot of transvestites and a lot of women down to jail.

How do they make the arrests?

They just come up and grab you. One transvestite they grabbed right out of her lover's arms, and took her down. The charges were solicitation. I was busted on direct prostitution. I picked up a detective – he was in a New Jersey car. I said, "Do you work for the police?" And he said no, and he propositioned me and told me he'd give me fifteen dollars, and then told me I was under arrest. So I had to do twenty days in jail.

Was the situation in jail bad?

Yes, it was. A lot of transvestites were fighting amongst each other. They have a lot of problems, you know. They can't go to

court, they can't get a court date. Some of them are waiting for years. You know, they get frustrated and start fighting with one another. An awful lot of fights go on there.

How are relations between the transvestites and the straight prisoners? Is that a big problem?

Oh, the straight prisoners treat transvestites like they're queens. They send them over cigarettes and candy, envelopes and stamps and stuff like that – when they got money. Occasionally they treat them nice. Not all the time.

Is there any brutality or another like that?

No, the straight prisoners can't get over by the gay prisoners. They're separated. The straight prisoners are on one side, and the gay prisoners are on another.

Can you say something about the purpose of STAR as a group?

We want to see all gay people have a chance, equal rights, as straight people have in America. We don't want to see gay people picked up on the streets for things like loitering or having sex or anything like that. STAR originally was started by the president, Sylvia Lee Rivera, and Bubbles Rose Marie, and they asked me to come in as vice president. STAR is a very revolutionary group. We believe in picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary. Our main goal is to see gay people liberated and free and have equal rights that other people have in America. We'd like to see our gay brothers and sisters out of jail and on the streets again. There are a lot of gay transvestites who have been in jail for no reason at all, and the reason why they don't get out is they can't get a lawyer or any bail. Bambi and I made a lot of contacts when we were in jail, and Andorra, she went to court and she walked out.

What do you mean she walked out?

Well, when you're picked up for loitering and you don't have a police record, a lot of times they let you go, and they let your police record build up, and then they'll go back there and look at it – and then they give you a lot of time. That's how they work it down there at the courthouse. Like my bail was $1,000, because I have a long record for prostitution, and they refused to make it lower than $500. So when I went to court they told me they'd let me go if I pleaded guilty to prostitution. That's how they do it, they tell you ahead of time what you're going to get. Like before you even go before the judge, they try to make an agreement with you, so that they can get your case out of court, you know.

What would have happened if you'd pleaded not guilty?

I would still be there. They gave me 20 days to serve. And a lot of people do that a lot of times. That's how come their record is so bad, because they always plead guilty just so they can come out, cause they can't get no lawyer or no money or no kind of help from the streets.

What are you doing now about these people who are still in there who need lawyers?

We're planning a dance. We can help as soon as we get money. I have the names and addresses of people that are in jail, and we're going to write them a letter and let them know that we've got them a lawyer, and have these lawyers go down there and see if they can get their names put on the calendar early, get their cases put out of court, make a thorough investigation.

I remember when STAR was first formed there was a lot of discussion about the special oppression that transvestites experience. Can you say something about that?

We still feel oppression by other gay brothers. Gay sisters don't think too bad of transvestites. Gay brothers do. I went to a

dance at Gay Activist Alliance last week, and there was not even one gay brother that came over and said hello. They'd say hello, but they'd get away very quick. The only transvestites they were very friendly with were the ones that looked freaky in drag, like freak drag, with no tits, no nothing. Well, I can't help but have tits, they're mine. And those men weren't too friendly at all. Once in a while, I get an invitation to Daughters of Bilitis, and when I go there, they're always warm. All the gay sisters come over and say, "Hello, we're glad to see you," and they start long conversations. But not the gay brothers. They're not too friendly at all toward transvestites.

Do you understand why? Do you have any explanation for that?

Of course I can understand why. A lot of gay brothers don't like women! And transvestites remind you of women. A lot of gay brothers don't feel too close to women, they'd rather be near men, that's how come they're gay. And when they see a transvestite coming, she reminds them of a woman automatically, and they don't want to get too close or too friendly with her.

Are you more comfortable around straight men than around gay men sometimes?

Oh, I'm very comfortable around straight men. Well, I know how to handle them. I've been around them for years, from working the streets. But I don't like straight men. I'm not too friendly with them. There's only one thing they want – to get up your dress, anything to get up that dress of yours. Then when you get pregnant or something, they don't even want to know you.

Do you find that there are some "straight" men who prefer transvestites to women?

There are some, but not that many. There's a lot of gay men that prefer transvestites. It's mostly bisexual type men, you know,

they go both ways but don't like anybody to know what's happening. Rather than pick up a gay man, they'll pick up a gay transvestite.

When you hustle on 42nd Street, do they know you're a transvestite, or do they think you're a woman? Or does it depend?

Some of them do and some of them don't, because I tell them. I say, "It's just like a grocery store; you either shop or you don't shop." Lots of times they tell me, "You're not a woman!" I say, "I don't know what I am if I'm not a woman." They say, "Well, you're not a woman." They say "Let me see your cunt." I say, "Honey, let me tell you something." I say "You can either take it or leave it," because, see, when I go out to hustle I don't particularly care whether I get a date or not. If they take me, they got to take me as I want 'em to take me. And if they want to go up my dress, I just charge them a little extra, and the price just goes up and up and up and up. And I always get all of my money in advance, that's what a smart transvestite does. I don't ever let them tell me, "I'll pay you after the job is done." I say I want it in advance. Because no woman gets paid after their job is done. If you're smart, you get the money first.

What sort of living arrangements has STAR worked out?

Well, we had our STAR home, at 213 E. 2nd Street, and you know, there was only one lesbian there, and a lot of stuff used to get robbed from her and I used to feel so sorry for her. People used to come in and steal her little methadone, because she was on drugs. I seen her the other day. She was the only lesbian who was staying with us. I really felt bad. She's back on drugs again. And she was really doing good. The only reason I didn't take her from STAR home and bring her here was the simple reason that I couldn't handle it. My nerves have been very bad lately, and I've been trying to get myself back together since my husband died in

March. It's very hard for me. He just died in March. He was on drugs. He went out to get some money to buy some drugs and he got shot. He died on 2nd Street and First Avenue. I was home sleeping, and somebody came and knocked at the door and told me he was shot. And I was so upset that I just didn't know what to do. And right after he died, the dog died, and the lesbian that was staying there was nice enough to pick the dog up out of the street for me. I couldn't hardly stand it. I had two deaths this year, my lover and then the dog. So I've just had bad nerves; I've been going to the doctor left and right. And then to get arrested for prostitution was just the tops!

What about job alternatives? Is it possible to get jobs?

Oh, definitely. I know many transvestites that are working as women, but I want to see the day when transvestites can go in and say, "My name is Mister So-and-So and I'd like a job as Miss So-and-So!" I can get a job as Miss Something-or-Other, but I have to hide the fact that I'm a male. But not necessarily. Many transvestites take jobs as boys in the beginning, and then after a while they go into their female attire and keep on working. It's easier for a transsexual than a transvestite. If you are a transsexual it's much easier because you become more feminine, and you have a bust-line, and the hair falls off your face and off your legs, and the muscles fall out of your arms. But I think it will be quite a while before a natural transvestite will be able to get a job, unless she's a young transvestite with no hair on her face and very feminine looking.

Isn't it dangerous sometimes when someone thinks you're a woman and then they find out you're a man?

Yes it is. You can lose your life. I've almost lost my life five times; I think I'm like a cat. A lot of times I pick up men, and they think I'm a woman and then they try to rob me. I remember the first time I ever had sex with a man, and I was in the Bronx. It was

a Spanish man, I was trying to hustle him for carfare to come back to New York City. And he took my clothes off and he found out I was a boy and he pulled a knife off of his dresser and he threatened me and I had to give him sex for nothing. And I went to a hotel one time, and I told this young soldier that I was a boy, and he didn't want to believe it and then when we got to the hotel I took off my clothes and he found out I was a boy for real and then he got mad and he got his gun and he wanted to shoot me. It's very dangerous being a transvestite going out on dates because it's so easy to get killed. Just recently I got robbed by two men. They robbed me and tried to put a thing around my neck and blindfold around my face. They wanted to tie my hands and let me out of the car, but I didn't let them tie me up. I just hopped right out of the car. There was two of them, too. I cut my finger my accident, but they snatched my wig. I don't let men tie me up. I'd rather they shoot me with my hands untied. I got robbed once. A man pulled a gun on me and snatched my pocketbook in a car. I don't trust men that much any more. Recently I haven't been dating. I've been going to straight bars and drinking, getting my money that way, giving people conversation, keeping them company while they're at the bar. They buy you a drink, but of course they don't know you're a boy. You just don't go out with any of them. Like my friend; she gets paid for entertaining customers, talking to them, getting them to buy a drink. I'm just learning about this field. I've never been in it before. That's what I've been doing. I've been getting a lot of dollar bills without even doing anything. I tell them I need money for dinner.

Is one of the goals of STAR to make transvestites closer to each other? Do transvestites tend to be a close-knit group of friends?

Usually most transvestites are friendly towards one another because they're just alike. Most transvestites usually get along with one another until it comes to men. The men would separate

the transvestites. Because a lot of transvestites could be very good friends, you know, and then when they get a boyfriend. . . Like when I had my husband, he didn't allow me to hang around with transvestites, he wanted me to get away from them all. I felt bad, and I didn't get away from them. He didn't like me to speak to them and hang around with them too much. He wanted me to go in the straight world, like the straight bars and stuff like that.

Do you think there's been any improvement between transvestites and other gay men since the formation of STAR, within the gay world, within the gay movement?

Well, I went to GAA one time and everybody turned around and looked. All these people that spoke to me there were people that I had known from when I had worked in the Gay Liberation Front community center, but they weren't friendly at all. It's just typical. They're not used to seeing transvestites in female attire. They have a transvestite there, Natasha, but she wears boys' clothes with no tits or nothing. When they see me or Sylvia come in, they just turn around and they look hard.

Some of the transvestites aren't so political; what do they think about your revolutionary ideas?

They don't even care. I've talked to many of the transvestites up around the Times Square area. They don't even care about a revolution or anything. They've got what they want. Many of them are on drugs. Some of them have lovers, you know. And they don't even come to STAR meetings.

How many people come to STAR meetings?

About 30, and we haven't even been holding STAR meetings recently. Like Sylvia doesn't have a place to sleep, she's staying with friends on 109th St.

Is there something you'd like to add?

I'd like to see STAR get closer to GAA and other gay people in the community. I'd like to see a lot more transvestites come to STAR meetings, but it's hard to get in touch with transvestites. They're at these bars, and they're looking for husbands. There's a lot of transvestites who are very lonely, and they just go to bars to look for husbands and lovers, just like gay men do. When they get married, they don't have time for STAR meetings. I'd like to see a gay revolution get started, but there hasn't been any demonstration or anything recently. You know how the straight people are. When they don't see any action they think, "Well, gays are all forgotten now, they're worn out, they're tired." I would like to see STAR with a big bank account like we had before, and I'd like to see that STAR home again.

Do you have any suggestions for people in small towns and cities where there is no STAR?

Start a STAR of their own. I think if transvestites don't stand up for themselves, nobody else is going to stand up for transvestites. If a transvestite doesn't say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite, then nobody else is going to hop up there and say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite for them, because they're not transvestites. The life of a transvestite is very hard, especially when she goes out in the streets.

Is it one of the goals of STAR to create a situation so transvestites don't have to go out in the street?

So we don't have to hustle any more? It's one of the goals of STAR in the future, but one of the first things STAR has to do is reach people before they get on drugs, 'cause once they get on drugs it's very very hard to get them off and out of the street. A lot of people on the streets are supporting their habits. There's very few transvestites out on the streets that don't use drugs.

What about the term "drag queen?" People in STAR prefer to use the term "transvestite." Can you explain the difference?

A drag queen is one that usually goes to a ball, and that's the only time she gets dressed up. Transvestites live in drag. A transsexual spends most of her life in drag. I never come out of drag to go anywhere. Everywhere I go I get all dressed up. A transvestite is still like a boy, very manly looking, a feminine boy. You wear drag here and there. When you're a transsexual, you have hormone treatments and you're on your way to a sex change, and you never come out of female clothes.

You'd be considered a pre-operative transsexual then? You don't know when you'd be able to go through the sex change?

Oh, most likely this year. I'm planning to go to Sweden. I'm working very hard to go.

It's cheaper there than it is at Johns Hopkins?

It's $300 for a change, but you've got to stay there a year.

Do you know what STAR will be doing in the future?

We're going to be doing STAR dances, open a new STAR home, a STAR telephone, 24 hours a day, a STAR recreation center. But this is only after our bank account is pretty well together. And plus we're going to have a bail fund for every transvestite that's arrested, to see they get out on bail, and see if we can get a STAR lawyer to help transvestites in court.

What's that thing going to be?

What thing?

That thing you just made.

It's a G-string. Want to see? This is so that if anybody sticks their hand up your dress, they don't feel anything. They wear

them at the 82 Club. See? Everybody that's a drag queen knows how to make one. See, it just hides everything. If they reach up there, they don't find out what's really there! I don't care if they do reach up there. I don't care if they do find out what's really there. That's their business.

I guess a lot of transvestites know how to fight back anyway!

I carry my wonder drug everywhere I go – a can of Mace. If they attack me, I'm going to attack them, with my bomb.

Did you ever have to use it?

Not yet, but I'm patient.

Y'ALL BETTER QUIET DOWN

Sylvia Rivera's speech at the
1973 Christopher St. Liberation Day Rally

Y'all better quiet down.

I've been trying to get up here all day, for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail! They're writing me every motherfuckin' week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a god damn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped in jail? Now think about it. They've been beaten up and raped, after they had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and try to get their sex change. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes, or to become women of the women's liberation. And they write STAR, not the women's group. They do not write women. They do not write men. They write STAR, because we're trying to do something for them. I have been to jail. I have been raped and beaten many times, by men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But do you do anything for them? No!

You all tell me, go and hide my tail between my legs.

I will no longer put up with this shit.

I have been beaten.

I have had my nose broken.

I have been thrown in jail.

I have lost my job.

I have lost my apartment For gay liberation, and you all treat me this way?

What the fuck's wrong with you all?

Think about that!

I do not believe in a revolution, but you all do. I believe in the gay power. I believe in us getting our rights or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights. That's all I wanted to say to your people. If you all want to know about the people that are in jail -

and do not forget Bambi l'Amour, Andorra Marks, Kenny Messner, and the other gay people that are in jail - come and see the people at STAR House on 12th Street, on 640 East 12th Street between B and C, apartment 14. The people who are trying to do something for all of us and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class, white club. And that's what y'all belong to.

REVOLUTION NOW!
Give me a G!
Give me an A!
Give me a Y!
Give me a P!
Give me an O!
Give me a W!
Give me an E!
Give me an R!
GAY POWER!
Louder!
GAY POWER!

BITCH ON WHEELS

Speech by Sylvia Rivera, June 2001
Meeting of Latino Gay Men of New York

[Editor's note: Omitted the beginning of the speech where Sylvia retells the events of Stonewall]

I am tired of seeing my children - I call everything including yous in this room, you are all my children - I am tired of seeing homeless transgender children; young, gay, youth children. I am tired of seeing the lack of interest that this rich community has. This is a very affluent community. When we can afford to re-renovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about your homeless children from your community, and I know this for a fact, because the reason I have to get clearance every time to come into this building is because I saw many of the kids before the building was renovated up the street, many of the children are sleeping on the steps of that church. I went in there with an attitude. I raised hell. Yes, maybe I did try to destroy the front desk, but I did not attack anybody. But what did this community center do to me? My thanks for everything I have done for this freakin' community? Had me arrested and put in Bellevue! So I'm supposed to kiss their asses? No, I don't kiss nobody's ass cause I haven't lived this long, because I don't kiss nobody's ass.

That night, I remember singing "We Shall Overcome," many a times, on different demonstrations, on the steps of Albany, when we had our first march, when I spoke to the crowds in Albany. I remember singing but I haven't overcome a damn thing. I'm not even in the back of the bus. My community is being pulled by a rope around our neck by the bumper of the damn bus that stays in the front. Gay liberation but transgender nothing! Yes, I hold a lot of anger. But I have that right. I have

that right to have that anger. I have fought too damn hard for this community to put up with the disrespect that I have received and my community has received for the last thirty-two years.

And a point of history, you know that it took the Gay Rights Bill here in New York seventeen years to pass. [It was approved in 1986.] But I'll go through the beginning. When we were petitioning for the Gay Rights Bill, there was only one person that was arrested. That was me. Because I had the guts to go into the Times Square area on 42nd Street and petition the people to sign that petition. And the only reason I did it was because that bill did include the transgender community. Two or three years into the movement and the bill is being presented and we're going back and forth to City Hall. They have a little backroom deal without inviting Miss Sylvia and some of the other trans activists to this backroom deal with these politicians. The deal was, "You take them out, we'll pass the bill." So, what did nice conservative gay white men do? They sell a community that liberated them down the river, and it still took them seventeen years to get the damn bill passed! And I hate to say it, but I was very happy. Every time that that bill came up for a vote, I said, "I hope it doesn't pass," because of what they did to me. As badly as I knew this community needed that bill, I didn't feel it was justified for them to have it on my sweat and tears, or from my back.

So Stonewall is a great, great foundation. It began the modern day liberation movement, like we spoke before about the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. Yes, there were lots of other little groups but you had to be what they called themselves the "normal homosexuals." They wore suits and ties. One of the first demonstrations that they had, lesbians who'd never even worn dresses were wearing dresses and high heels to show the world that they were normal. Normal? Fine.

One of my best friends now, who has employed me for the last seven years before I changed jobs, is Randy Wicker. Randy

Wicker was a very well-known gay male activist in 1963. He was the first gay male - before any real movement was there - to get on a talk show and state to the world that he was a normal homosexual. I give him credit for that. He has done a lot of different things, but he also in 1969 and for many years trashed the transgender community. It took him a lot of years to wake up and realize that we are no different than anybody else; that we bleed, that we cry, and that we suffer.

But this has been going on for the longest time. I mean, before gay liberation, it was the same thing: "drag queens over there; we're over here." The world came tumbling down in 1969 and on the fourth anniversary of the Stonewall movement, of the Stonewall riot, the transgender community was silenced because of a radical lesbian named Jean O'Leary, who felt that the transgender community was offensive to women because we liked to wear makeup and we liked to wear miniskirts. Excuse me! It goes with the business that we're in at that time! Because people fail to realize that - not trying to get off the story - everybody thinks that we want to be out on them street corners. No we do not. We don't want to be out there sucking dick and getting fucked up the ass. But that's the only alternative that we have to survive because the laws do not give us the right to go and get a job the way we feel comfortable. I do not want to go to work looking like a man when I know I am not a man. I have been this way since before I left home and I have been on my own since the age of ten.

Anyway, Jean O'Leary started the big commotion at this rally [Christopher Street Liberation Day, 1973]. It was the year that Bette Midler performed for us. I was supposed to be a featured speaker that day. But being that the women felt that we were offensive, the drag queens Tiffany and Billy were not allowed to perform. I had to fight my way up on that stage and literally, people that I called my comrades in the movement, literally beat the shit out of me. That's where it all began, to really

silence us. They beat me, I kicked their asses. I did get to speak, I got my points across.

There was another speaker that day, Lee Brewster (she passed a year ago), very well known to the trans community and to the cross dressing community. She got up on stage, threw her tiara to the crowd and said, "Fuck gay liberation." But what people fail to realize was that Lee Brewster put up a majority of the money for the Gay Pride March of 1970, which was our first one. And it was once again, out of maybe two or three hundred of us that started from the Village, up 6th Avenue, up two little lanes of traffic, that we were the visible ones. We were the visible ones, the trans community. And still and yet, if you notice where they keep pushing us every year, we're further and further towards the back. I have yet to have the pleasure to march with my community, for the simple fact that I belong to the Stonewall Live Veterans group, I march in the front.

But until my community is allowed the respect to march in the front, I will go march with my community because that's where I'm needed and that's where I belong. And yes, I'll wear my big sash that says "Stonewall." And people are gonna ask. And I'm gonna tell why; because this is where the Heritage of Pride [the group that organizes the march] wants to keep us. You see, I don't pull no punches, I'm not afraid to call out no names. You screw with the transgender community and the organization Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries will be on your doorstep. Just like we trashed the HRC for not endorsing the Amanda Milan actions, and then when they threw us a piece of trash, we refused to accept it. How dare you question the validity of a transgender group asking for your support, when this transgender woman was murdered? No. The trans community has allowed, we have allowed the gay and lesbian community to speak for us. Times are changing. Our armies are rising and we are getting stronger. And when we come a knocking (that includes from here to Albany to Washington) they're going to know that

you don't fuck with the transgender community.

Mainstreaming, normality, being normal. I understand how much everybody likes to fit into that mainstream gay and lesbian community. You know, it used to be a wonderful thing to be avant-garde, to be different from the world. I see us reverting into a so-called liberated closet because we, not we, yous of this mainstream community, wish to be married, wish for this status. That's all fine. But you are forgetting your grass roots, you are forgetting your own individual identity. I mean, you can never be like them. Yes we can adopt children, all well and good, that's fine. I would love to have children. I would love to marry my lover over there [Julia Murray], but for political reasons I will not do it because I don't feel that I have to fit into that closet of normal, straight society which the gay mainstream is always going towards.

This is why they don't want the transgender people to have rights. This is why they always tell us, "Oh let us get ours, and then we'll help you get yours." If I hear that one more time, I think I'll jump off the Empire State building. But I'm sure a lot of people would like that, especially the old-timers, because I have actually mellowed down through the years. I used to be a bitch on wheels.

But these are days that we have to reflect on. This is a month that's very important. I may have a lot of anger but it means a lot to me because after being at World Pride last year in Italy, to see 500,000 beautiful, liberated gay men, women, and trans people and being called the mother of the world's transgender movement and gay liberation movement, it gives me great pride to see my children celebrating. But I just hope that - and I've heard a lot of positive things in this room tonight, as far as people realizing that the trans community was your benefactor and that people are opening up their eyes. But you got to remember, don't just say that because we're here; show your support when we send out a call for action to support our actions, the things that we

plan to do.

I mean, it was a hurting feeling that on May 4th, 2001 we had history-breaking civil rights in for city council. Our bill was finally introduced. Wow! We waited this long! But where were my sisters and brothers? Where were my children that I liberated? Very few allies showed up. But what made me proud was that the trans community showed up in numbers, and the girls that work these corners even got the nerve enough to come into public and go onto something that they would never consider doing, which was to walk on City Hall because they are all afraid of the police, but they were there. So, that goes to show the rest of the community, that technically when we ask for your support, we want your support. But in the long run, if it's not there, we will acquire what we need.

But, we must remember: Amanda Milan's actions are coming up. I hope to see a lot of you there. But remember one thing, when you fell out en masse, including myself, for Matthew Shepard, and many of us went to jail, I only got to see maybe five minutes of the whole thing because being the person who I am, a front liner, as soon as I sat down in the street, one of the white shirts that has known me for years, the person says, "When the order goes down, get that bitch right there, get her off the street and into the paddy wagon." So that's the way that went.

But it seemed like everybody and their mother came out for Matthew Shepard. A white, middle class gay boy that was effeminate! Amanda Milan got killed last year, five days before Gay Pride. We waited a month to have a vigil for her. Three hundred people showed up. What kind of a - doesn't the community have feelings? We are part of the gay and lesbian community! That really hurt me, to see that only three hundred people showed up. And it's not like it was gonna be a long vigil, I mean we went from 36th Street to 42nd Street. So, when we call people, not only to sponsor our actions, we expect to see bodies there. I mean, but like I said, we're capable of doing it on our own

because that's what we're learning now, after thirty-two years, that we cannot depend on nobody, except our own trans community, to keep pushing forward.

But remember that as you celebrate this whole month, of how you are liberated. And I feel so sorry for those that are not able to read the history of the Stonewall around the world. And we have to blame once again all the publishers and whatnot. I tried to push Martin Duberman's publishers [Plume/Penguin] to have the *Stonewall* book translated into Spanish. But they felt that the book would not sell in Third World countries, in Latin countries. Which is a lot of crap! Because the only way that you're going to learn the history, especially if you're far away and just coming out, is to be able to pick up a book and read about the history of the Stonewall and how you were liberated. I know many of our countries are not as liberated as the United States, as far as the gays are concerned, especially Latin American countries, because once again you got to remember that we have to play that big macho role, you know, men, we have to make lots of babies! But it's a shame that it has taken thirty-two years for people to finally realize how much we have given to you, to realize the history of the trans involvement in this movement. And in that note, I hope to see yous when I send out the emails to you, and I hope you pass that on. That I hope to see a lot of yous there for the Amanda Milan actions and I once again wish yous all a very happy gay pride day but also think about us.

QUEENS IN EXILE, THE FORGOTTEN ONES

Essay by Sylvia Rivera, published in
GenderQueer-Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary (2002)

My mother was 22 when she decided to off herself. She was having a shaky second marriage; my stepfather was a drug dealer, and that was one of the reasons the marriage was on shaky grounds. He threatened to kill her and me and my sister. I was 3 years old.

She mixed rat poison into milk, drank it, and gave some to me. I believe the brand was JR Rat Poison, and it came in a light reddish-orange tin. When they took me off to get my stomach pumped was the last time I saw my mother alive, because after being in the hospital three days, she died.

She drank her poison, and I drank only part of what she gave me because I didn't like the taste of the milk. I added sugar to it. I didn't know what it was, but it just didn't taste right. I remember seeing her laid out in the coffin. Back in those days you had to wake a body for three days. It was like sheer torture, but in my mind she was sleeping. My grandmother told me after I was grown up more that I tried to wake her up, that I disturbed her in her coffin.

One of the last things she told my grandmother on her deathbed was that she wanted to kill me because she knew I was going to have a hard life. And she pinpointed it, because it has not been an easy road. I've enjoyed the struggles, but I've also had my bouts with trying to off myself.

I was very effeminate as a young child. Life wasn't easy with my grandmother because she always told me that she never really wanted me, that she wanted my sister. My sister was taken away from her when my stepfather put her up for adoption. My grandmother never forgave me for that; she wanted my sister

because she was a girl, and I was a boy.

I basically grew up without love. I guess in her own strict way my grandmother loved me. She did want me to acquire a good education. She insisted in putting me in all-white Catholic schools. And she didn't want me to learn the Spanish language. It upset her when I spoke to her in Spanish.

She wanted me to be a white child. She was a prejudiced woman. I mean, dark people, African-American people, would scare her. She came from Venezuela. She would have a little gesture or say something when black people would come on the subway or something; she would either rub her arm and say, "Look at them, they're coming," or she would call them "blonds" and look dead in their direction. She was a very racist woman.

She did not approve of my mother's marriages because both men were Puerto Ricans. My father was a very dark-skinned Puerto Rican. My stepfather was not as dark. My grandmother didn't like the idea of me having Puerto Rican blood. It would have been better if I had just been a Venezuelan child.

I was wearing makeup in the fourth grade. I did it because I liked makeup, and I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. I remember being questioned about it by my teacher, and I said, "Yeah, my grandmother knows." Of course it was a lie. She didn't know because there was a woman who was taking care of me out on Long Island, and I would put on my makeup on my way to school. I knew I would wear it home and take it off by 5 o'clock without having any problems because there was nobody in the house.

So to me it was normal. I really didn't get much of a slacking from the kids. I remember only one child, and he was the sixth-grade bully, who called me a faggot because I always played with the girls. At the time, I was either playing hopscotch or doing double Dutch. And I just went off on him. I beat the daylights out of him, and I don't remember much of it, but I do remember the confrontation in front of our principal. The principal asked

me, "Why did you beat him up?" I said, "He called me a faggot. Do I look like a faggot to you?" I was painted, you know, and had on these tight, tight pants. I didn't know what a faggot was, but I felt insulted. I had already had sex, but I thought it was all part of just being who you were.

I only felt how unusual this was when I was back on the lower east side with my grandmother where I had to go on the weekends. It was a male dominant culture. Of the boys I hung around with, I slept with one. The other boys knew where I was coming from. Every once in a while there were remarks. A lot of the women would make innuendos. A woman once time patted me on my ass and said, "Huh, your ass is getting big, that means you're getting pumped," and I took offense at that because I knew when I was home - you know, on the lower east side - that there was something wrong with what I was doing. My grandmother used to come home and it smelled like a French whorehouse, but that didn't stop me. I got many ass-whippings from her.

Before I even left home, I was turning tricks with my uncle for money. We didn't have much money, and I wanted things my grandmother couldn't buy. In the beginning I didn't know who I was attracted to. I'd look at men in old movies and get fascinated by them, but my sexuality was aroused when I was 7 years old. My cousin was baby-sitting me, and I always found him attractive. He offered and I accepted.

As I've grown up, I've realized that I do have a certain attraction to men. But I believe that growing up the way I did, I was basically pushed into this role. In Spanish cultures, if you're effeminate, you're automatically a fag; you're a gay boy. I mean, you start off as a young child and you don't have an option - especially back then. You were either a fag or a dyke. There was no inbetween. You have your journey through society the way it is structured. That's how I fit into it at that time in my life. Those were the words of that era. I was an effeminate gay boy. I was

becoming a beautiful drag queen, a beautiful drag queen child. Later on, of course, I knew that Christine [Jorgensen] was already around, but those things were still waiting in the backs of people's minds.

Being on my own at 10 years old, on the street in Times Square, was frightening. I had to be resourceful. I had already experienced the hustling scene with my uncle. I had found my way to 42nd Street by the comments made when my family used to go to Coney Island. The adults would say about people who got on at 42nd Street who were effeminate and wearing makeup, "Oh, look at the maricóns," and I would have to turn my face away because it hurt me to hear that. They would say, "This is where the maricóns come and they make money." Of course, that registered in my head, and I found my way back there and dipped and dabbed and made money selling my body. So when I left home to 42nd Street for good I wasn't seasoned, but I knew what I had to do to survive.

I was adopted by a few young (but older than I was) drag queens. They helped me out. We hung out all night. Chickie lived with her mother in Brooklyn somewhere and she knew that her mother went to work at a certain time, so she'd bring three or four queens home and we'd crash and get out of there before her mother came home. It was like roaming from house to house, or I'd stay in the hotel room the trick would rent.

I was afraid, but I didn't really think of it because I needed to survive. I found it disgusting, though. I used to go home and scrub myself clean. This was in the early '60s. The drag scene was a night life. We basically didn't go out during the day. I guess we had to hide. Also, if you're out all night, you don't want to be out during the day.

But it was dangerous on 42nd Street. We all stuck together. The police were constantly chasing us. We had a code: If one of the girls or one of the boy hustlers spotted a cop, word was passed down that "Lily in blue" was coming. This meant we would

disappear. So a warning of "Alice in the blue gown" or "Lily" meant to disperse.

I was too young to go to the few clubs that existed, but there were many house parties. They were called rent parties. There was always something going on. And it was fun, you know, because people needed money for their rent. Fifty cents, a dollar...you helped somebody out and you might end up crashing there some time. That was basically the scene for the youth back then, except for the drag balls. But you had to be a little older than I was to start going with that group of people.

You had drag balls up in Harlem and you had them downtown. We had the Phil Black's ball, we had the April in Paris ball...those were the two main ones. And there were balls constantly going on. I know the April in Paris ball used to be held at the Manhattan Center on 34th Street.

Balls gave us a social affair. If you didn't go, you just weren't part of the in crowd. And what talent you saw there! There were women who spent a year sewing and designing their costumes, just to get ready for one ball. And the hairstyles with 20 wigs...I'm exaggerating - we'll say seven or eight piled on top of one another. Being brought in in a gilded cage carried by half-naked young men. It was something extravagant and beautiful, something you don't see in balls today.

We had cross-dressers, but I didn't even know what cross-dressers were until much later. The street queens have always been prostitutes to survive, because some of us left home so early, or it just wasn't feasible to be working if you wanted to wear your makeup and do your thing. But there was that division at the balls where you had drag queens who were not from the same side of the tracks we were. Some of them were very affluent.

There were always drugs on the streets. In the early '60s there were a lot of ups. I got my Benzedrine supply from my truck driver customers. I was fascinated by speed. Besides alcohol. But those were my drugs of preference back in the mid '60s and early

'70s. And then I changed around. I did a lot of heroin. I did heroin for about five years. Actually I've done everything that's been put out, especially in the '70s...LSD...basically everything, even to modern-day crack. But I haven't done ecstasy. And most everything I've kicked on my own.

I just sobered up off booze two years ago. I'm sober for the first time in my life without any alcohol in my body, and I've been drinking since before I left home. I started dipping at home, drinking booze about the age of 8. I always drank booze, besides taking all the other drugs. I'd mix my drugs and my booze together. It was something I thought was going to kill me. I thank my lucky stars. Somebody must be watching. Some higher power has been watching me cause I've tried to off myself at least six or seven times. It just wasn't meant to be.

I met Marsha Johnson like a year after I hit the streets. Marsha, I believe, was seven years my senior. It was Halloween night and she had just come out of the Port Authority because she still lived in Jersey with her family. She was dressed up in drag. A bunch of Spanish queens started going, "Oh, look at Marsha," and this one queen named Louisa snatched Marsha's wig. Well, Marsha wasn't going to have it. When she caught up to Louisa up on 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue she beat the living daylights out of her.

Then one time I was walking across Sixth Avenue and she was standing there on the corner. She called me to her side, we introduced ourselves, and a very strong sistership was born. She took me out to eat. She was standing there hustling even though she was working as a waiter at Childs' Restaurant. But she always had to make extra change, as she always said.

And later on we would see each other at clubs or at different gatherings. She knew my first lover and came to my apartment out in Jersey. We stood by each other, had each other's back for many years. And even back in the days of pre-Stonewall, we would sit on 44th Street, a lot of us girls like Marsha and Vanessa;

Miss Edwina, Miss Josie, a whole bunch of us, would sit around in a room. We'd be getting high or something and we'd start talking politics. We'd start talking politics and about when things were going to change for us as human beings.

After Stonewall, Marsha and I just kept up the struggle. We saw the need after being out on the streets at our ages. We needed to help our own people. Even when we were living on 44th Street, Marsha always took in people, gave them a place to stay. At that time, before Stonewall, everyone always had a house full of people, people crashing because there was no room. If one queen had a place and you were her friend, she would gladly let you sleep on her floor or share her bed. There would be not just the two of us; there would be maybe four or five. And everybody was sneaking around not wanting to get caught by whoever we were renting from.

There are two stories of how Marsha died. One is that she supposedly committed suicide, and the other is that somebody murdered her. They fished her body out of the Hudson River at the end of Christopher Street nine years ago. It was very shocking for me when I got the telegram. Actually I was really pissed at her because our pact was that we would cross the Jordan together. She would get angry with me when I tried to off myself, so we made a pact. That's why I find it hard to believe she committed suicide.

Marsha had been on SSI (Social Security Disability) for quite some time because she had several nervous breakdowns. She had been locked up several times in Bellevue and Manhattan State. Her mind started really going. She had a doctor who did not diagnose her syphilis right away. So when they finally caught it, it was in the second stages. Marsha lived in her own realm, and she saw things through different eyes. She liked to stay in that world, so with that and the syphilis infection...and then her husband, Cantrell, was shot by an off-duty officer. He was shot to death and she really went over the edge.

She managed to come out of that one, and then she lost it again. She came over to my house dressed like the Virgin Mary, in white and blue, and she was carrying a wooden cross and a Bible. She came in and started preaching the Bible to me and we had a few words. Then she took the wooden cross and hit me upside the head with it. If it had been any other queen, I would probably be in jail, cause I would have killed her. She drew blood because the nail wasn't completely bent, and she put a gash in my head.

The next day I heard they arrested her and locked her up again. So she had several breakdowns. Bob Kohler, who was very close to her and to me, says that she committed suicide. He was closer to her the last few months. She always would go down to the end of Christopher Street, supposedly talking to her brother and wanting to go talk to her father in the water.

And there is testimony that some guys were messing with her and they threw her in the river. The police couldn't prove it. So I'm still stuck in the middle. When I heard that she was murdered, I couldn't understand why anybody would kill her. Marsha would give the blouse off her back if you asked for it. She would give you her last dollar. She would take off her shoes. I've seen her do all these things, so I couldn't see someone killing her. I know there are crazy people out there. I know there are transphobic people out there. But it's not like she wasn't a known transperson. She was loved anywhere she went. Marsha was a great woman.

Being arrested for "loitering with the intention of prostitution" became a routine, you know, cause I knew I was getting out the next day. The process is that they'll keep you, they'll process you, and you'll go in front of a judge. The judge will most likely dismiss the charge cause they go by your record. In all the years I was out there hustling - and that's between hustling and still doing politics - I was blessed because I was never arrested for prostitution. It was always "with the intention" or just standing

out on a corner, loitering. So I never got arrested or did time for prostitution.

The judge paid people like me no mind because I had no convictions. Cases would be thrown out, so it would never be on my record. Most of the girls had records, so that's what the judge would go by. To get busted for pros you had to do a solicitation - or they entrapped you. A lot of the girls would ask me how come I wouldn't go with a customer, and I suppose it was because I got the wrong vibe. I believed he was the Man.

"Aw," they'd say, "you always saying that."

"All right, when he comes back around you take him. I'm not jumping in the Man's car." Of course I'd see them 15 or 30 days later and I'd say, "Oh, so we were on vacation again, huh?"

"Yeah, I shoulda listened to you, Sylvia."

I go by what I feel. What my spirits tell me, I'm following. Every time I went with what my spirits told me (except for two times, and both times I had to fight my way out of a situation), I was right. My instincts would say no, I'd rather starve to death. And the girls wouldn't listen. And Marsha used to be the same way, I would tell her, "Don't go with that man."

"Aw, Miss Thing, stop..."

"I'll see you when you get home in 30 days."

But I was lucky. The only time I did time was for possession of heroin. And the cops who arrested me told me, "We couldn't get you one way, so we figure we had to get you another way." The cops in the area I worked at the time, which was downtown on Chrystie Street by the Bowery, were angry because they could never bust me for pros.

I did get into cars with undercover agents, not realizing until too late. I had one cop pull a gun out on me and say, "You're gonna do me or I'm gonna take you in."

I'm like, "Fine, take me in, I don't care." Then I pop the door open to jump out of the car.

He says, "If you get out of the car, I'll shoot...."

I say, "Aw, you'll be doing the world a favor, one less queer in the world, one less junkie...one less ho!" And I got out very grandly, walked to the corner, and then ran like a bat out of hell.

I was bold; I would take these chances. Why should I give this man a blow job, not knowing whether he's going to take me to jail or not? I don't like the idea of giving free service. I'm not out there to give anyone free service. At that time I was a heroin addict and I had a bunch of kids to support in STAR House. I had no time for games.

And there was another incident. I told the man where to park and he didn't, just kept on going and running through red lights. He said, "I'm taking you in for pros." And I said, "No, you're not." And he was going at a high speed. I popped the door open and threw myself out of the car, rolled, then hit the street running.

I was untouchable until the heroin thing. For that I got sentenced 90 days. That first night I fall asleep and my bullpen is packed with men. I wake up sick as a dog because I need a fix and I think, Aw, shit, I'm fucked. And there's one guy I know from the streets, so he gives me some protection, for a while. But when they take him upstairs to the Tombs, I'm left alone with all these other men. And suddenly they start hitting on me. "Come on, mama. I been in here for a year. I need a good piece of pussy," and blah, blah, blah...and I'm like, "Oh, no, we're not having this."

So I get knocked around a couple of times. I fight back, I holler for the C.O., and he comes to the cell. "What's the problem?" And I say, "These guys are trying to take me off," and he very nicely tells them, "Enjoy yourselves, boys, have fun." So I have to think fast. "O-o-okay...but we only suck dick. I'm sorry, I just don't get fucked up." Well, I guess they were dumb, because if some ho - you have a woman cornered and this woman is telling you that all she does is suck dick - then you know she must have an ulterior motive.

The one I ended up giving head to regretted it. I didn't stop

biting that boy's dick until I drew blood, and they beat me so hard on my head for me to let go. That gave me a reputation. By the time I got to Rikers Island that evening, it was, "That's the crazy bitch that bit that boy's dick. Leave her alone." It's always good to play crazy.

But it is rough for some of the girls, because they give it up. And once you give it up, you gotta give it up to every Tom, Dick, and Harry. So automatically you try to protect yourself in the hope that you don't get killed in the process, or you give it up and be used for all the time you're in jail. So I'd rather take the easy way out. I'd rather be dead than be subject to that. I'd always managed to protect myself.

Jail is not a happy place for trans women and gay boys. It's a very unhappy place. Even though you're segregated, kept out of the general population, you have boys who would sign the papers that they were homos. I used to find that fascinating, that every time I'd been arrested, they'd have this big stamp that stamps all your records homo in big red letters. I used to crack up about that. I said, "Jesus, couldn't you just put it in a little box?" No, they got to put it all over in red letters.

You asked to be segregated. Drag queens didn't have to ask for it. We were automatically segregated. But anyone could say they were gay and they'd let them through. So the boys would try to run your quad, except that when you had a bunch of queens on one floor, it was very hard for the men to dominate. A lot of times there were fights on the quad with the boys cause they would try to rule and the girls would not have it. It's like, "This is our property and we don't wish to be here, but this is our vacation spot and you are here...I guess... because you want to get your dick sucked..." Many of those boys who claimed to be straight and signed the papers as homos were the first ones to fall down to their knees when you were in the cell with them or turn on their stomachs wanting to get fucked. There's a reason behind everything.

I thought about having a sex change, but I decided not to. I feel comfortable being who I am. That final journey many of the trans women and trans men make is a big journey. It's a big step and I applaud them, but I don't think I could ever make that journey. Maybe it comes of my prejudice when so many in the late '60s and early '70s ran up to the chop shop up at Yonkers General. They would get a sex change and a month, maybe six months, later they'd kill themselves because they weren't ready. Maybe that made me change my mind. I really don't know, but I always like to be an individual. In the beginning I decided that not getting the operation was because I wanted to keep the "baby's arm."

My first lover taught me how to make love to another man, and in my youth I was always supposed to be the bottom. This is the way I thought a relationship was...an effeminate gay boy was solely to be the bottom. My lover was a butch-looking boy, very butch. Actually, no one even knew he was gay.

He showed me how to make love. He said, "When you're with another man, this is the way men make love." It was very hard in the beginning. He would ask me and I would refuse to make love to him cause I didn't think he was telling me the truth. But he knew exactly what I was doing. After we would make love he'd go out, and he'd tell me, "You wait for me to leave to masturbate, to jerk off when we can be doing that together. That's what love is about."

People now want to call me a lesbian because I'm with Julia, and I say, "No. I'm just me. I'm not a lesbian." I'm tired of being labeled. I don't even like the label transgender. I'm tired of living with labels. I just want to be who I am. I am Sylvia Rivera. Ray Rivera left home at the age of 10 to become Sylvia. And that's who I am.

I will be 50 years old this coming Monday. I don't need the operation to find my identity. I have found my niche, and I'm happy and content with it. I take my hormones. I'm living the

way Sylvia wants to live. I'm not living in the straight world; I'm not living in the gay world; I'm just living in my own world with Julia and my friends.

[...]

The main drag queen bar at that time was the Washington Square Bar on Third Street and Broadway. That's where you found diesel dykes and drag queens and their lovers. Oh, yeah, we mixed with lesbians. We always got along together back then. All that division between the lesbian women and queens came after 1974 when Jean O'Leary and the radical lesbians came up. The radicals did not accept us or masculine-looking women who dressed like men. And those lesbian women might not even have been trans. But we did get along famously in the early '60s. I've been to many a dyke party. And transgendered men back then were living and working. I met many who were working and living as men with their female lovers. They were highly respected. The lesbian community today has a lot to learn from the old ways of the lesbian community.

I didn't really get involved in gay politics until 1970. After Stonewall, I was getting my news from the Gay Power newspaper, and I was at the founding of the Gay Activists Alliance. That was the first real political meeting I went to. They were just getting their platform statement, their mission statement. I saw an ad in the paper, and I called the number and said, "Hello, do you take drag queens?"

They said yes and I got Miss Josie, and off to this meeting we go. First thing we get there it's "What's your name?" and I'm, like, "Sylvia." And the guy at the door said, "Don't you have a boy's name?" And I'm like, "Who? What?" So right away that was a setback. But I got involved, and the reason I stayed with them was for the gay rights bill. That's when we started petitioning for the gay rights bill, the New York City bill. And I

felt comfortable being there.

That first meeting was where I met one of my best girlfriends even today: Bebe. She was sitting there, and I started talking to Josie in Spanish. I said, "Hmm...she looks like one of us," referring to her as a drag queen. She was a young child. We were just 19 years old. She turned and answered me in English, "I understand everything you said about me, and, yes, I'm one of you. I'm like you." And we became the best of friends.

The reason I stayed in GAA was the simple fact that I liked the idea that we, as an organization, were going to change the world. And there was a place for us. I fell right into the grand scheme of things. I remember I was out petitioning, I'd been doing it for a couple of weeks, and I remember that on April 15, 1970, I was petitioning on 42nd Street. I hadn't picked up why no gay men had come into the Times Square area. I figured that while they were up on 72nd Street, where most of the gay men were living at that time, or in the Village, I could take care of 42nd Street - my home turf.

There was a "Stop the War in Vietnam" demo and people started coming. The cops had dispersed the demo, and I'm standing out there collecting signatures, and two cops come by, and they say, "You have to move." And I'm like, "Why? All I'm doing is collecting signatures. I'm petitioning for gay rights."

"It's against the law."

I said, "What? I thought it said in the Constitution we have the right to acquire signatures..."

"You don't have an American flag."

"What does an American flag have to do with my collecting signatures?"

"You have to have an American flag."

I said, "It wouldn't make a difference. I've been to jail with poor Rosie over there, who is always being arrested with her American flag and her Bible for preaching the gospel." Rosie was

a right-wing Bible-thumper. Well, I got arrested for petitioning for gay rights.

That's how my whole activist career started. Besides, I didn't consider that night at Stonewall to be so important out of all the other movements going on. Getting that first arrest for something that I believed in was...wow, what a rush!

I bailed myself out of jail, and went to GAA the following day and told them what happened. We had a press conference, and Arthur Bell - may his soul rest in peace - grabbed me out of that meeting and dragged me to his apartment up in the 60s. And he says, "I'm going to put you up on a pedestal. You will be a star." I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah..." So we did an interview on the bus, and then he followed me for about a week on 42nd Street, collecting signatures from people: mature women and men, couples, heterosexuals, and gay people. That's how things started for me.

And I was happy at GAA for a while. But it wasn't my calling. I found out later on that they only believed in acquiring civil rights for the gay community as a whole. Which is fine. They did a lot of good just concentrating on the gay issue. But they left the queens behind.

I enjoyed Gay Liberation Front better because we concentrated on many issues for many different struggles. We're all in the same boat as long as we're being oppressed one way or the other, whether we are gay, straight, trans, black, yellow, green, purple, or whatever. If we don't fight for each other, we'll be put down. And after all these years, the trans community is still at the back of the bus.

I despise that. I'm hurt and get depressed a lot about it. But I will not give up because I won't give the mainstream gay organizations the satisfaction of keeping us down. If we give up, they win. And we can't allow them to win. The reason we, right now, as a trans community, don't have all the rights they have is that we allowed them to speak for us for so many damn years, and

we bought everything they said to us: "Oh, let us pass our bill, then we'll come for you."

Yeah, come for me. Thirty-two years later and they're still coming for me. And what have we got? Here, where it all started, trans people have nothing. We can no longer let people like the Empire State Pride Agenda, the HRC in Washington, speak for us. And it really hurts me that some gay people don't even know what we gave for their movement.

It's like I was saying all this year during pride month: "It's not my pride, it's their pride. It's your pride, not mine. You haven't given me mine yet." I have nothing to be proud of except that I've helped liberate gays around the world. I have so many children and I'm still sitting on the back of the bus, still struggling to get kids into proper housing, and to get them education, to get them off drugs.

That's why we decided to resurrect STAR at the beginning of the year. Something has to be done. You need a grassroots organization that's willing to ruffle feathers and step on toes. STAR was born in 1971 right after a sit-in we had at New York University with Gay Liberation Front. We took over Weinstein Hall for three days. It happened when there had been several gay dances thrown there, and all of a sudden the plug was pulled because the rich families were offended that queers and dykes were having dances and their impressionable children were going to be harmed.

So we ended up taking that place over. That's another piece of history that is very seldom told, even in regular gay history, about that sit-in. Maybe that's because it was the street queens once again who were still hanging around from 1969 with some of the radicals like Bob Kohler. He is a radical who is 75 years old and still out there working very hard doing his thing. He's been an ally to the trans community since I knew him and before I knew him. He's insulted and offended when the gay community doesn't turn out for our demos.

STAR house was born out of the Weinstein Hall demonstration, because there were so many of us living together, with Marsha and myself renting two rooms and the hotel room, and even then we still didn't have enough room to house people. With the help of GLF and Gay Youth, we threw our first fundraiser and raised enough money to go to the Mafia and rent our first building. You can say anything you want about the Mafia - yes, they took advantage of us, but when we needed them, they were there.

They did open up tacky places for us to party in. And they got us a building for $300 a month. They were there for us. Marsha and I and Bubbles and Andorra and Bambi kept that building going by selling ourselves out on the streets while trying to keep the children off the streets. And a lot of them made good. A lot of them went home. Some of them I lost; they went to the streets. We lost them, but we tried to do the best we could for them. The contribution of the ones who didn't make it out into the streets, who wanted something different, was to liberate food from in front of the A&P and places like that, because back then they used to leave everything out in front of the store before it opened.

So the house was well-supplied, the building's rent was paid, and everybody in the neighborhood loved STAR House. They were impressed because they could leave their kids and we'd baby-sit with them. If they were hungry, we fed them. We fed half of the neighborhood because we had an abundance of food the kids liberated. It was a revolutionary thing.

We died in 1973, the fourth anniversary of Stonewall. That's when we were told we were a threat and an embarrassment to women because lesbians felt offended by our attire, us wearing makeup. It came down to a brutal battle on the stage that year at Washington Square Park, between me and people I considered my comrades and friends.

This was at pride. It was the year Bette Midler came to sing

"Happy Birthday" for us. It was happy for the mainstream community, but it was not happy for us. They tried to stop drag queen entertainers from performing. It was angry because I had been scheduled for many months to speak at that rally. So I'm stubborn, and I wasn't going to have it. Because for four years we were the vanguard of the gay movement, and all of a sudden it was being taken away. We were being pushed out of something we helped create.

I remember this man telling me, a straight man who was my boss at the time, when I was working in Jersey - he said, "Ray, the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Be careful. Watch it." And I saw it. And I still see it. I literally had to fight my way up onto that stage. I was beat. I got to speak. I said my piece. And I basically left the movement for many years. I didn't come back into view until the 20th anniversary. And that was with David Isay's Remembering Stonewall.

He found me where I was in Tarrytown. I was living and working there. And then along came Martin Duberman and Stonewall. But I was really hurt in 1974. I tried to kill myself. I had 60 stitches on this arm after that incident. And I wasn't ever going to come back to the movement. But you know who held fast to her word was Lee Brewster. When she got up and spoke after I did, she took off her tiara, threw it into the crowd and said, "Fuck gay liberation!"

What people fail to remember is, here's another drag queen who has not been recognized as a hero in our community. She put a majority of the money up for the first march in 1970. Lee Brewster changed the drinking laws for gay men to be able to be served in public at a regular bar instead of an afterhours club. She did this. Lee Brewster, with her own money, changed the laws on the books in New York against criminal impersonation that was held over drag queens' heads.

When she died and I wrote an obituary for her, these freaking gay rag newspapers didn't even have the balls to put in

her accomplishments - even after her death. Yes, I'm angry with this fucking community. I wish sometimes that 1969 had never happened, they make me so angry. But it happened, and I have a whole lot of children. One of my most beautiful moments, all these years, was in 2000 at world pride when the Italian transsexual organization in Bologna invited Julia and me to participate. I got to speak to all those people that have oppressed our community. Because it's not just here in the United States with the mainstream community but all over.

It's astonishing to see how history repeats itself. But I reminded all those 500,000 children out there that day that if it wasn't for us, they would not be where they're at today. They wouldn't have anything, none of them, from one corner of the world to the other. Because it was our community, the street kids, the street queens of that era, who fought for what they have today. And they still turn around and give us their backs.

So STAR has been officially restarted since January 6, 2001. What happened is, we were at church services at the Metropolitan Community Church and they were calling for monitors for the upcoming trial of Amanda Milan's assassins. So I spoke to Julia during this whole thing, and Reverend Pat was giving a sermon about it, and I thought, We can't let this just die. What are courtroom monitors going to do? I said we got to keep Amanda in the public's eye. That's the only way people are going to realize the plight we're going through.

And during the sermon Reverend Pat talked about the three kings. And he said, "Who are we to say that the three kings were not three queens? Only queens would get up in the middle of the night and throw elaborate stuff into bags and travel to the other ends of the earth not knowing where they're going, but they knew they had to be there. And they followed the star."

So I told her, "We have to do it."

That whole day was telling me what to do - the sermon and the fact that Amanda's murderers were coming up for trial and

we had not kept pressure and visibility on it. We were three queens following the STAR. And that's it. The only word I changed was Transvestite to Transgender.

We raised a lot of hell back when STAR first started, even if it was just a few of us. We ate and slept demonstrations, planning demonstrations. We'd go from one demo to another, the same day. We were doing what we believed in. And what we're doing now, the few of us who are willing to unsettle people and ruffle up feathers, is what we believe in doing. We have to do it because we can no longer stay invisible. We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are. We have to show the world that we are numerous. There are many of us out there.

Unfortunately, many of us have to live by night, because of the lack of laws or protections. A lot of trans women are standing out on street corners and working clubs. And many of them are highly educated, with college degrees. Many of us have to survive by selling our bodies. If you can't get a job, you have to do whatever it takes to live.

I live at Transy House now with Julia. We've lived there for four years. It's a communal house run by Rusty [Mae Moore] and Chelsea [Goodwin]. They started it eight years ago and run it after the model of STAR House. Chelsea was one of my original children at STAR House. It's a safe house for girls who are still working the streets. It gives them a roof over their heads without having to hustle for money. They pay $50 a week if they can afford it. If not, they help out around the house. One girl cleans up for her board. The only rules are no drugs and no business done on the premises by working girls. And one of the political things we do is lobby for the legalization of medical marijuana for cancer patients and AIDS patients, along with the struggle for transgender rights.

It's a shame that more people in the trans community don't open up houses like Rusty and Chelsea are doing with Transy House. We get calls all the time from city and state agencies

looking to place people, and we have to tell them, "Look, we're constantly filled up and we're doing this by ourselves without support from anyone." There are lots of shelters for people with AIDS but no safe house for people without AIDS. There's no safe shelter for these kids, so they end up sleeping on the streets. It hurts to see this still going on after 30 years, when Marsha and I first started trying to do something about it.

I'm happy that I've seen this new civil rights legislation introduced in the New York city council. It's historic, and I'm glad that we all came out in numbers at the hearing because it made an impression, even though the major news media didn't cover us. Octavia St. Laurent said it last year at Amanda's funeral: "Men have rights, women have rights, children have rights, gays have rights, lesbians have rights, animals have rights...we ain't got shit."

Before I die, I will see our community given the respect we deserve. I'll be damned if I'm going to my grave without having the respect this community deserves. I want to go to wherever I go with that in my soul and peacefully say I've finally overcome.

A REFLECTION OF SYLVIA'S DREAMS

Bebe Scarpi interviewed
by Lindsay Branson
for a 2010(?) exhibit in OutHistory.org
"On Gay Liberation in New York City, 1969-1973"

Sylvia was a[n] interesting personality. She saw a lot of grassroots needs. She herself maybe left her house at eleven or twelve years old and was hustling on the street. A lot of young, feminine gay males, they didn't fit in the households and they left. There were no opportunities owed(?) to them but they were young kids, they were teenagers. So they would come to the Village in many ways. They would be you know picked up and abused on drugs — what had happened to Sylvia herself.

She wanted an organization that would basically provide a haven for these runaways to go to, where they would learn — this is really funny. It never occurred to Sylvia that they possibly could fit in and get real jobs and pass as females. That was a little before the time of the great advances in transsexualism and that type of thing. But she felt if they had to hustle someone should show them how to hustle correctly and be safe. If they had to use drugs someone should supervise that they didn't abuse. If they had boyfriends they should be treated nicely by their boyfriends. They should get some sort of an education and maybe if possible an entry-level job if it all went well for them to get them off hustling. So she had this really grassroots idea of what should be done for transsexual and drag-oriented teenagers.

She wanted a house where these runaways could come to and she'd play den mother. And that's basically — and then STAR was also there to politically fight, having been excluded from the gay rights bill. They would go in with their banners and participate in the demonstration or participate in the march and basically just make a public impression that there's another kind

of gay, the drag queen gay who would — and even though they knew about the heterosexual transvestite STAR people were all drag queens.

It was not very tightly organized but they did succeed in getting a house and they did succeed in adopting, quasi, setting up this familial structure for about four or five young people. Many of whom took advantage of them and just because you were alone and on the street didn't mean you were a nasty bastard in your heart, but Sylvia was a very giving person and she opened her doors to anybody who needed help. Now she had her own demons but she was always willing to help someone who was down and out, really, and without questioning. If you needed a place to stay, you needed a sandwich or food, you could have what she had.

Branson: Did you find much support from any of the gay liberation groups? [trails off]

—No. Maybe by speech-wise. But you got to remember, a lot of the STAR people were drug users, so why would you give them a donation. You know, that kind of thing. A lot of the people were engaging in definite illegal activities — prostitution and robbing John's and whatnot. So there were a lot of reasons why people couldn't whole-heartedly... Some people like I think, some of the more thinking ones like in particular Bob Kohler could rationalize that these were down and out people, that a lot of their acting out was the fact that they had been disabused as growing up and all this other stuff and they were not part of society. And he would help when he could and he rationalized helping them but the mainstream groups thought them as an embarrassment and criminals and, you know, not going anywhere to begin with so why throw good after bad.

If the sponsoring agent of STAR had been the Episcopalian Church or the B'nai B'rith, no one — everyone would say how nice they're doing this out of charity. But because it was

sponsored by drag queens themselves and the mainstream gays looking down at the drag queens couldn't see anything good coming from that. Had it been sponsored by the National Gay Task Force it probably would have been much more successful. But the ideas that she started, you know, they've been picked up and improved on by the Trevor Project, by some of the gay youths—wherever there is a sort of a home for gay runaways or what you would call transgendered kids now. That really is a reflection of Sylvia's dreams.

The oppression against transvestite of either sex arise from sexist values and this oppression is manifested by hetrosexuals and homosexuals of both sexes in form of exploitation, ridicule, harassment, beatings, rapes, murders.

Because of this oppression the majority of transvestites are forced into the streets we have framed a strong alliance with our gay sisters and brothers of the street. Who we are a part of and represent we are; a part of the revolutionaries armies fighting against the system.

1. We want the right to self determination over the use of our bodies; the right to be gay, anytime, anyplace; the right to free physiological change and modification of sex on demand; the right to free dress and adornment.

2. The end to all job discrimination against transvestites of both sexes and gay street people because of attire.

3. The immediate end of all police harassment and arrest of transvestites and gay street people, and the release of transvestites and gay street people from all prisons and all other political prisoners.

4. The end to all exploitative practices of doctors and psychiatrists who work in the field of transvestism.

5. Transvestites who live as members of the opposite gender should be able to obtain identification of the opposite gender.

6. Transvestites and gay street people and all oppressed people should have free education, health care, clothing, food, transportation, and housing.

7. Transvestites and gay street people should be granted full and equal rights on all levels of society, and full voice in the struggle for liberation of all oppressed people.

8. An end to exploitation and discrimination against transvestites within the homosexual world.

9. We want a revolutionary peoples government where transvestites, street people, women, homosexuals, blacks, puerto ricans, indians, and all oppressed people are free, and not fucked over by this government who treat us like the scum of the earth and kills us off like flies, one by one, and throws us into jail to rot. This government who spends millions of dollars to go to the moon, and lets poor Americans starve to death.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE
S.T.A.R.